

New Social Security hearing office in Akron aims to cut backlog

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November 15, 2010

AKRON, Ohio – Ohioans have died waiting for decisions — or that first payment to arrive — in cases of Social Security disability claims.

In a U.S. Senate subcommittee field hearing Monday in downtown Akron, Social Security Administration Inspector General Patrick P. O'Carroll Jr. said the backlog of cases is so extensive, 31,000 initial disability claims are pending in Ohio.

O'Carroll said an Ohioan who applies for disability benefits will wait an average of 479 days — nearly 16 months — for a decision.

In Akron, the average disability appellant will wait 334 days for a case to be decided, he said.

And, O'Carroll said, the average wait statewide is 119 days simply to receive an answer about whether such a case goes to a hearing.

For those in need of disability payments to avoid foreclosure or to have enough money to pay for a grocery bill, "your heart goes out to them," retiring Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio, said at the hearing.

Some help in alleviating the backlog arrived Monday with the opening of a new Akron hearing office — staffed by 11 administrative law judges and 53 office workers — on the fourth floor of the Fifth Third Bank building at 121 S. Main St., in the heart of downtown.

Voinovich; U.S. Senate subcommittee chairman Daniel K. Akaka, D-Hawaii; Social Security Administration Commissioner Michael J. Astrue; Cleveland district office manager Richard E. Warsinskey; North Carolina Judge D. Randall Frye; and other state and local dignitaries spoke at the hearing and dedication.

More than 100 local, state and federal Social Security Administration officials and staffers attended the dedication, where Voinovich and his Senate subcommittee colleague, Akaka, shared ribbon-cutting honors.

More than the impact of case statistics — a backlog of 842,000 initial disability claims nationwide, O'Carroll said — is what can happen to those who have no choice but to wait for a disability benefits decision.

"There is nothing worse," Frye said at the hearing, "than to see a wife whose spouse dies waiting for their benefits from Social Security."

It happens often, he said.

Cleveland once closest

Before the opening of the new office, those from Akron who applied for disability benefits had to travel to downtown Cleveland to have their cases decided, Warsinskey said.

"The Cleveland office had space issues, and because there were only so many judges you could get in there, we really needed another hearing office," Warsinskey said. "So having a hearing office in Akron is really going to help the people in this area."

Akron's office will serve residents around Akron, Ravenna, Warren, Youngstown, Medina, Canton, Wooster and New Philadelphia, officials said.

Another hearing office will open Tuesday in Toledo, which will help to further alleviate the backlog of cases statewide.

The principal factor contributing to the backlog nationwide, Astrue said after Monday's hearing, has been cutbacks in the yearly federal budget appropriations.

"We have been chronically underfunded for 15 straight years, beginning in the early 1990s," Astrue said. "We went 15 straight years where Congress appropriated less than the president requested.

"So it was a bipartisan thing. It didn't matter the party of the president or the party of Congress, our administrative funding was just not as sexy as a lot of other things that Congress wants to spend money for.

"We were able to start breaking that paradigm in 2008. We've actually done a little better than the president's request in the last couple of years. Congress was generous to us in the Recovery Act, and that's made a huge difference in making some of the investments in infrastructure that we needed in order to meet the rising number of claims."

Staff reductions

The 2008 recession also contributed to the backlog, officials said, because state budget cuts resulted in staff reductions at local claims hearing offices.

Despite the fact the federal government provides 100 percent of the funding for State Disability Determination Services employees, 16 states, including Ohio, have insisted on furloughs for at least some of their DDS employees.

"I can't imagine," Frye said, "that everyone in the country wouldn't be outraged by furloughing people whose salaries are paid by the federal government. It's unfortunate. It's an American tragedy in my view."

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